THE PROSE POEM:
AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL

Volume 2 | 1993

Nancy Lagomarsino's *The Secretary Parables*

Ellen Smith

© Providence College

The author(s) permits users to copy, distribute, display, and perform this work under the following conditions: (1) the original author(s) must be given proper attribution; (2) this work may not be used for commercial purposes; (3) the users may not alter, transform, or build upon this work; (4) users must make the license terms of this work clearly known for any reuse or distribution of this work. Upon request, as holder of this work's copyright, the author(s) may waive any or all of these conditions.

The Prose Poem: An International Journal is produced by
The Berkeley Electronic Press (bepress)
for the Providence College Digital Commons.
http://digitalcommons.providence.edu/prosepoems/

Nancy Lagomarsino. *The Secretary Parables.* Cambridge: Alice James Books, 1991. 70 pp. $8.95

To compose is to build and arrange, to order and to fill a space in an economical way. When Ben Jonson wrote the first drafts of his lyric verse in prose, did he consider the act of composing to be what followed these first drafts, as expressive fine-tuning often follows the sketching out of bare meaning and message? I have to believe that prose poems, like lyric poems, are artifacts of an act of composition. The form of the prose poem, then, is not a repository for jottings, brief musings or anecdotes. Rather, it is a form that invites them in only to cordon them off from their original contexts. This separation and segmentation puts a new burden on the language and syntax, a burden that is all the more critical because the other physical resorts of poetry, such as line breaks and space within and between lines, are off-limits.

Composition is the evident engagement of language in this struggle of language. The prose poem is not a package but rather a point at which language is under an unusual stress because it has neither the earmarks of verse nor the discursive expansion of prose at its disposal. A poem's composedness, or composure, consists in the evidences of such a stress and struggle. It is on this premise that I read Nancy Lagomarsino's book-length collection.

The Secretary Parables, as a collection of over 50 prose poems, belies a variety of motivations for writing in this form. About half seem to engage in the sort of composition I've defined above. The poems particularly lacking composedness are those which smack of unworked journal entries, those which too often give way to the discursive uses of prose, those which set up analogies in an expository fashion, and those in which diction is flimsy.

One of the truly composed pieces in Lagomarsino's book is this poem, "Along for the Ride":

> You're telling me about the funeral parlor in Florida that specializes in "natural settings"—for a price, Aunt Maude can be propped in the same swing where she spent so many hours. Or picture Uncle Bernie on the 9th green, visor shading his eyes. Children bent over a favorite toy, all signs of disease brushed away. Infants would be simplest, wrapped in flannel as though fresh from a bath.

> We start inventing our own funerals—lashed to a raft on the rapids, drenched mourners lining the banks. Or, better still, slumped together in the basket of a rising balloon. I've never felt so alive.

I will use this poem as a touchstone in the collection. It is fulfilled on the grounds of composition because: it embodies a moment of believable utterance; the context of the utterance is woven into—rather than outside of—the text ("You're telling me about..." progresses naturally to "We start inventing...".); the diction is as sensually motivated as it is economical ("lashed to a raft on the rapids"); and the syntax allows us to notice the rhythm and inherent musicality of a contemporary, non-literary idiom.

As for the motivation for the use of the prose-poetic form (or, some might argue, "anti-form"), "Along for the Ride," as a commentary on this novel packaging of death as the ultimate still life, in turn packages the casual conversation casually; the topic of death becomes only nominally the poem's topic, for the casualness of the utterance, as it is composed, de-emphasizes the elegiac universality of the topos in favor of conveying one of the topic's particular aspects in time, place and discourse. Critics and scholars of Baudelaire's prose poems have seen in the form a concession by the debauched romantic to modern urban existence. The prose poem is seen as a window in a densely-populated city, a window which offers a delimited (and therefore limited) vista of experience and a hopelessly non-transcendent point of view. By extension, the prose poem is a frame in which the particular individual experience is framed modestly and transiently. Because of this, it is easy for the private journal entry and the prose poem to become confused with one another. And a good number of Lagomarsino's poems in this collection fall into this blur.

Lagomarsino is preoccupied with dreams. In this book are numerous entries in a sort of public dream-journal, including "Rescue," "Lucid Dreamer," and "Listen to the Dream." I quote a key passage from the latter poem: "A passing dream reins me in, saying—Don't try to outsmart your dreams. Think of dreams as music you can see." This may be useful as part of one's poetics, but it assumes that the dream-text in itself is composed, as music is composed. The quantity of titles in this collections is due, it seems, to Lagomarsino's pairing of companion poems, such as the juxtaposition of a poem about a

dream with a poem about some waking relationship to the dream in the external world. A good example is this pairing:

> "Fear in a Public Place"
>
> Starting at the armpit, the doctor spirals around toward my nipple, pressing firmly with two fingers. He's looking for a lump that won't move, perhaps as small as a grain of sand. It seems hopeless, yet he won't stop.
>
> Then, after a routine x-ray, I'm called back for another series. The left breast shows a suspicious shadow. Again I shoulder into the hospital rag called a gown. Again the technician lifts my breast onto the plate.
>
> The crushing begins, a tank in a village of children. The prodigal slips under.
>
> "The Provinces of Sleep"
>
> Last night I dreamed a surgeon cut off my breasts—instead of nipples there were semas. I crossed the provinces of sleep looking for friends, someone I could tell, and I sobbed more deeply than I can when awake. Perhaps I only needed to lose one breast, perhaps the knife was too thorough.
>
> This morning I held my breasts with relief. So much sorrow in one dream...we find in sleep what we find in love.

Now, elsewhere in *The Secretary Parables*, Lagomarsino writes, in comparing poetry to figure skating, that "My favorites are the ones who make the difficult moves simply—perhaps I like them better because they seem more alone" ("On Skimming an Anthology of Contemporary American Poetry"). If ever a difficult move was simply made and worthy of admiration, it is the move the poet makes herself at the end of "Fear in a Public Place." The leap between the mammogram and the tank/village metaphor is made with precision and little discursive intervention. Only someone with an active and conscious dream-life, only someone who extends that dream-life to the life of language in the moment of composition, could make it. Why, then, is "The Provinces of Sleep" even necessary? Dreams are dreams and poems are poems; poems often contain dreams, dreams seldom in themselves make poems. Maybe this shortcoming of the

dream-text in itself is what necessitates the unsatisfyingly "universal" statement at the close of "Provinces." The fact that such a move was needed, a move which robs the prose poem of its power as particular facet, might suggest that the logging of dreams is not always the best use of the form. "Fear in a Public Place," on the other hand, will remain for me one of the most memorable prose poems I have ever read.

Another, more strongly-composed dream poem is "Lucid Dreamer," which is one of nine poems in the section entitled "The Secretary Parables." This is a fairly solid run of poems attempting, as prose poems best do, to be facets of an individual experience. The section focuses on the ordinary insights of an ordinary persona, and does so with the womanist insistence that the Prufrocks, Huffy Henrys and Tommy Wilhelms of the twentieth-century world have female counterparts. In "In the Women's Tent," Lagomarsino gives us the ritual of a woman changing her tampon and makes a plausible leap by inscribing it in a larger communal sphere dominated by men: "For years she wore those narrow pallets between her legs, moving from one month to another like a nomad....For years she's left no trace." Here, the difficult move is made simply but maybe too simply: the regularity and rituality of menstruation finds little accuracy in the analogy with "nomad"; rather, the opposite is more likely to be the case.

Sandwiched as this title-section is, between sections containing 44 other poems—most of them in the author's first person—the persona in "The Secretary Parables" is rather transparent, as so many of her concerns and ways of thinking and using language overlap with those of the "I" of the rest of the book. Perhaps this section might have been extensively developed, or presented initially in the book, to prevent the present hollowness of the persona.

Ellen Smith